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SUBJECT: LATVIAN NATIONAL SECURITY COMMITTEE PRESSURES STATE
TELEVISION TO "BE LESS NEGATIVE"

REF: A) 07 RIGA 561, B) 07 RIGA 898

¶1. On May 14, the Latvian National Security Committee of Parliament brought in Edgars Kots, Director of the Latvian National Television Station (LTV), for questioning. Though the sessions of the committee are closed, council member Linda Murniece (member of opposition party New Era), told media that committee members criticized the content and tone of LTV's overall broadcasts. These committee members asserted that the station broadcasts only negative news about the GOL and general developments in Latvia--and neglected to portray positive stories. One example apparently cited by committee members of a positive story that could be covered by LTV was, "a baby-cow being born." According to Murniece, a majority of the members of the National Security Committee were not satisfied with the content and way the National Television is broadcasting.

¶2. Once the matter of the meeting became public, committee head Dzintars Jaundzeikars admitted publicly that the committee did discuss the tone and content of broadcasts of LTV. He justified the meeting by asserting, "LTV influences the views of society--which in their turn influences the overall security of society." Kots responded to media inquiries by stating that he is forbidden by law from discussing the content of committee meetings. However, he admitted to Latvian newspaper Diena that "the subjects discussed in the meeting were beyond the competence of the committee."

¶3. The Head of LTV News Service, Mareks Gailitis, criticized the meeting, noting that MPs should be careful not to confuse "public" television with "state" television. Employees of the LTV News Service also expressed concern that Kots meeting with the committee was an attempt by politicians to pressure the station to alter its tone and content. The meeting has been broadly condemned as unacceptable by Latvian media experts, and opposition party New Era has asked the National TV and Radio Council, as well as the Ombudsman's Office, to investigate the incident and the committee's involvement in the work of LTV.

¶4. Kots' selection as LTV director general in March 2008 by Latvia's National Radio and Television Council (NRTVC) generated much discussion at LTV and within the Latvian media in general. According to press reports, some NRTVC members hinted that the vote for Kots was influenced by political motivations. At the time, Latvian Language daily Diena reported that selecting Kots was "not an easy choice." Although only two members of the NRTVC did not vote for him, others had criticized him in the past. A Diena op-ed commented on the selection, writing that members of the NRTVC who belong to New Era voted against Kots, but those NRTVC members representing government coalition parties, as well as the chair Mr. Kleckins (Harmony Center) supported him. Neatkariga raised concerns about Kots' lack of support among LTV employees, referring to changes he implemented in the LTV news service upon arrival, resulting in several employees resigning their positions. Neatkariga also claimed that Kots had a significant personal problem - a lack of communication skills.

¶5. Comment: This incident is disturbing. It follows two instances in 2007 in which some elements within the government attempted bring outside pressure to bear on the editorial and personnel decisions at LTV. In June 2006, LTV management demoted the director of a weekly

analytical and investigative news program "De Facto." The director had produced some programs that were sharply critical of the governing coalition (ref A); in December 2007, LTV was pressured to cancel the broadcast of a documentary, "The Putin System," that revealed controversial information about then-Russian President Vladimir Putin (ref B). Latvia certainly enjoys a lively press climate in which sundry points of view are expressed in both Latvian and Russian. However, these three incidents in less than 12 months reveal that some within the GOL are more than willing to exert political pressure to try to influence the content of public media in Latvia. End Comment